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## Analytical Essay

# The Media Politics of Latin America's Leftist Governments

Philip Kitzberger

**Abstract:** Does Latin America's left turn matter in media politics? Has ideology any impact on governments' practices and policies regarding media and journalistic institutions? This essay focuses on the existence of a specific kind of media activism on the part of leftist governments in Latin America. It does so by assessing discourses on the media, direct-communication practices, and media regulation policies. While showing that the current binary distinctions stressing the existence of two lefts – “populist” and “nonpopulist” – obscure important commonalities and continuities, the author demonstrates that institutional and structural constraints account for the differences among the various leftist governments in Latin America. In sum, the paper challenges the prevailing neglect of ideology as a relevant factor in explaining developments in government–media relationships in the region.

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**Keywords:** Latin America, media, journalism, government, ideology, leftism

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## Introduction

In recent years, Latin America has witnessed a wave of leftist governments. In spite of their common self-identification as part of a new regional left and their egalitarian claims of social justice and political inclusion, these governments differ in terms of leadership, mobilization, and policy orientation. One of the most noteworthy features of these new political experiences has been the rise in media–government conflict and oppositional polarization. These “media wars” have been fought openly in front of the public. But rather than being due to the governments’ leftist orientation, the cause has predominantly been said to be the populist or authoritarian character of the heads of government, viz., Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, Néstor Kirchner, and Rafael Correa, which is seen as inimical to Western standards of press freedom. Although not that radical, the rapport between Luis Inácio “Lula” da Silva, Dilma Rousseff, Tabaré Vázquez, and José “Pepe” Mujica, whose governments are viewed as “moderate” or “nonpopulist” leftist, and the media institutions in their respective countries has also been uneasy. Nevertheless, their governments’ conflicts with the media – unlike those of the aforementioned leaders – have been deemed “normal” and within the parameters of liberal democracy.

In fact, little attention has been paid to ideology as a factor that might account for recent changes in media–government relations in the region, and indeed overall.<sup>1</sup> Ideological identities aside, the growing confrontation between governments and the media in Latin America and elsewhere has been seen as part of a trend of increasing media proactivity on the part of governments’ executive branches. This proactivity has been seen as a response to the challenge of a political field colonized by an autonomous and powerful media logic (Helms 2008).

Should the indifference to ideology be reconsidered, given the recent re-politicization brought about by Latin America’s left turn? Does this left turn matter in media politics? More specifically, do the attitudes of the so-called “populist” leftists (Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Argentina) to the media and journalism have anything in common with other “modern” leftist governments, such as those in Brazil, Uruguay, and Chile?

While not denying the importance of other factors in traditional supra-ideological governmental repertoires with respect to the press and media,

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1 Comparative political communications research has shown little interest in ideological orientations, since its establishment as a research field has been linked to the convergent homogenization of media systems and to the worldwide depoliticization and standardization of media management techniques by political actors. This may change following the recent political polarization of US networks, however.

this paper demonstrates that ideology is indeed central in explaining some of the recent features of governmental communications and media policies in Latin America.

By exploring the impact that leftist identity, ideas, and agendas have had on certain governments, this essay claims that some specific traits in the media activism of leftist governments are noticeable. Although they face extremely diverse constraints, those governments that have been part of Latin America's so-called left turn share certain critical views that influence their public communication practices and their media policy agendas.

Nevertheless, these common views are not a result of a shared leftist nature. Rather, the commonality originates in the legacy of neoliberalism. The market reforms of the 1990s led to unprecedented change in the Latin American media landscape (Waisbord 2000; Hughes 2006; Becerra and Mastriani 2009); expansion, concentration, and commercialization gave media institutions a new relevance in social and political life. These tendencies conform and thus reinforce a wider complex of social and political inequalities. In a region that still has some of the worst Gini indicators in the world, the structure of the media systems is functional to the structuring of a "social distance" that translates into an over-presence of socioeconomic elite interests and points of view in the political system. The media's role is relevant insofar as they structure a public sphere in which the interests and experiences of subaltern classes and groups are less visible and legitimate (Hughes and Prado 2011; Blofield 2011).

This structural condition made the media a potential issue for the left. As Levitsky and Roberts have said,

the left refers to political actors who seek, as a central programmatic objective, to reduce social and economic inequalities. Left parties seek to use public authority to redistribute wealth and/or income to lower-income groups, erode social hierarchies, and strengthen the voice of disadvantaged groups in the political process. In the socioeconomic arena, left policies aim to combat inequalities rooted in market competition and concentrated property ownership, enhance opportunities for the poor, and provide social protection against market insecurities (Levitsky and Roberts (2011: 5).

With the backlash against neoliberalism, these institutions' association with social and economic elites and their lack of discursive autonomy and distance in relation to the latter exposed the media as instruments of the powerful, thereby revitalizing media-critical discourses and dormant reformist traditions in the region. In those countries where governments claiming leftist identities emerged, these latter views influenced government strategies, practices, and policy agendas.

This essay assesses the empirical phenomenon for three interrelated dimensions of this media activism: (1) government discourse and understanding of the media, (2) direct-communication devices and attitudes regarding journalism, and (3) media regulation policies. This summarized description and a brief outline of the variation among the cases allows for the evaluation of contending explanations of leftist governments' media activism in Latin America. It is argued that the current dyadic distinctions between the populist and nonpopulist left obscure important commonalities, while the nuances and contrasts in the media politics of the various governments can be better viewed when placed on a continuum according to the historical, structural, and institutional constraints these governments have faced.

## Assessing Media Activism on the Part of Leftist Latin American Governments

### Governments' Public Media Discourse

The first dimension that characterizes leftist governments is their discourse about the press and media. The former share a critical vision of the latter institutions' role in society and politics. However, what makes them stand out from other governments is that most of them have gone public with these critiques, although with varying intensity and political success.<sup>2</sup> This strategy, aimed at unveiling the media institutions' true nature and providing evidence of the bias and partisanship behind their self-presentation as impartial bodies, seeks to undermine their credibility and public legitimacy.

It has been argued that publicly criticizing the media for "bad news" biases or "stigmatizing" them as "oppositional weapons" in order to undermine their influence has been common to most Latin American executives (Ruiz 2010). What distinguishes the leftist governments as a subgroup in this regard is that most of their public allusions are framed by some common ideological assumptions. Although all of the political and social actors in the region have come to perceive the media as increasingly influential and have developed some practical responses, this response on the part of the left has taken a particular form. A common nucleus can be observed beyond particular contexts and inflections. The core assumption is that despite their claims of neutrality, media and journalistic institutions are powerful social

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2 "Going public" has been described as a political strategy that seeks to mobilize support for a given policy through direct public appeals so as to curb resistance from other institutional actors (Kernell 1997).

actors linked to the upper classes, social elites, or powerful corporations. Be they instrumentalist perspectives that view the press as the mouthpiece of the establishment or structural perspectives that view the media as constructors of neoliberal common sense through anonymous logics, these visions share the idea that power is not distributed democratically within the media sphere but according to social power. In fact, media power is viewed as essential to the maintenance of the status quo. Hostility on the part of the media is therefore interpreted as part of the resistance shown by the upper classes and powerful established interests to the reformist and democratizing agendas of progressive governments.

Consequently, these characterizations alternatively call for the democratization of access and voice in the media sphere, for reforms of media structures, or even for Gramscian counterhegemonic strategies. In some cases, these claims are framed in terms of radical participatory views of democracy, while in others they are referenced in terms of representative democracy. However, they all share the idea that voice equalization is essential to democracy. This democratic imperative, as will be seen further on, underlies public- and alternative-media policies.

Public confrontation between presidents and the media has been a salient feature of politics in Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Argentina for many years. In one in two public appearances, Chávez has made negative references to the media. Correa, Morales, and the Kirchners probably follow close behind him. Though existent, this type of public confrontation has been more sporadic in Brazil and Uruguay, while it is nonexistent in Chile. In the most radicalized cases, it is the presidents themselves who seem to go public with confrontational appeals. Nevertheless, governments' public questioning of the media does not necessarily take place only through presidential discourse; it may also occur at lower levels of government, in aligned media, and through allied parties, unions, Web communities, or other grass-roots organizations. In brief, governmental practices of contesting big media can be performed either in a vertical and centralized manner or, simultaneously or alternatively, in a more decentralized and capillary fashion. The discussion of the second analytical dimension takes up both types of practices.

## Direct-Communication Devices and Journalistic Conventions

The second dimension that characterizes leftist governments concerns their public communication strategies and their relationships with the media and journalism as mediating institutions. Leftist governments tend to deploy particular media practices intended for direct communication with large audiences. These range from centralized modalities such as regular or sporadic presidential broadcasts, traveling cabinets, and the communicative instrumentalization of public occasions or ceremonies, to more decentralized practices using diverse communication platforms. The purpose of these practices is to bypass and contest mainstream media journalism, which is deemed to be dominated by media owners and therefore biased and distorting. In fact, these innovations are usually accompanied by a rejection of journalistic conventions such as press conferences, regular contact between official sources and journalists, and interviews.

The most noteworthy of these strategies has been the hosting by presidents of television or radio programs on a regular basis. Chávez's "Aló, Presidente" is the most reputed example, and variations on this format have been introduced by Correa, Lula, Rouseff, Mujica, and, on occasion, Morales. Additionally, most of the presidencies – with the exception of Chile – have made extensive use of "permanent campaign" tactics as regular forms of direct communication. "Itinerant cabinets," presidential tours, *cadena*s (i.e., the mandatory broadcasting of presidential speeches), and other controlled institutional events have developed into a way of placing prepackaged or relatively "unfiltered" messages in noncontrolled media. Especially in the more confrontational moments of the Andean and Argentinean cases, all these practices have been justified as a way to fight the "lies" and "disinformation" spread by the private media.

These practices upset press corps, since they neglect the journalists' professional routines. Other less visible conventions have been broken as well. Most governments have introduced vertical source control, which means that their officials are not allowed to have any press contact on politically relevant matters without previous authorization from above. The resulting lack of declarations collides with the journalistic need to obtain news on a daily basis. Journalists thus feel threatened as professionals, and in spite of any ideological sympathy they might have, they turn away from governments. This distancing, in turn, strengthens governmental perceptions of journalists as being controlled by media owners and further reinforces the direct-communication impulses mentioned above.

A number of important questions arise at this point: Do these practices belong exclusively to the repertoire of leftist governments in the region? Is

regular presidential broadcasting an ideological trend? Álvaro Uribe's regularly broadcasted "Concejos Comunales" are frequently compared to "Aló, Presidente." To some observers, Uribe seems closer to Chávez in this respect than the moderate left-wingers in the region. Such visions (those of the observers mentioned in the previous sentence) argue that it is populism and its inherent rejection of political mediation that explains communication style, not ideology (Waisbord 2003, 2011; Rincón 2008).

All of the above contentions hold some truth. Nevertheless, closer observation shows that ideology does actually matter. First, the meaning attributed by government agents to their own actions and the framework within which such action is publicly explained rest upon ideological understandings of the media's role. Second, populism – rather than a commitment to a particular cause – may be the form of politics (and political communication) acquired by governments born in the wake of a crisis in representative institutions (the party system, legislatures, and also the media). Third, ideological views make governmental courses of action intelligible; they are not *a posteriori* instrumental rationalizations of essentially authoritarian impulses against press freedom. Beyond discourse, ideology impacts the aggregate repertoire of government practices, defining government in a more inclusive way so that it comprises various formal and informal allied or co-opted groups. Focusing on government practices at a more decentralized level then highlights those features that non-leftist governments (populist or not) do not possess. The decentralized or capillary levels are not separate from government. Rather, they constitute an integral part of a distinctive media activism carried out by leftist governments which is intended to denaturalize and criticize the dominant media discourse.

One example of these decentralized practices is the state media's politically aligned airtime. Pro-government use of state media is a common practice. What is innovative is the existence of certain broadcasts specifically intended to unveil and contest the political and ideological biases of private media. Despite some differences between them, Argentina and Venezuela provide examples that have achieved public resonance and have significantly contributed to governments' questioning of private media.

At the grassroots level and on the Internet a myriad of discussion forums, blogs, websites, community media, and publishing enterprises, all carrying discourses critical of main-stream media, are mobilized, establishing a sort of counter-information trench war. These base-level initiatives aimed at questioning media credibility are linked to governments in different ways. In some cases, the link is limited to informal alliances with preexisting groups in civil society. Where governments are based on strong party organizations, as in Brazil and Uruguay, the grassroots activities tend to be em-



bedded in the latter. In other cases, most notably Venezuela, the state plays a major role in shaping such decentralized initiatives.

In sum, if we focus solely on presidential activity, Uribe and Chávez may share the key goal of centralizing their personal authority through their direct-communication strategies, as explanations based on populism stress. But the Bolivarian leader's communications aims do not stop there; he is also building a revolutionary counterhegemony. What further differentiates Venezuela's experiences from those of Colombia is not only the ideological orientation of its discourse, but also its consequent fostering of market-alternative communications networks as part of governmental media policy. With the exception of Chile, which displays none of the features discussed, all the cases considered share – albeit with varying intensity – a politics of circumventing and/or subverting the dominant media/journalistic discourse. This politics is informed by critical leftist ideas such as hegemony, voice inequality, class or race biases in the media, popular empowerment, and democratization.

## Media Policy and Regulation

The third dimension that characterizes leftist governments concerns media regulation. In contrast to the deregulation and market-oriented policies that increased the commercial media's presence during the neoliberal 1990s, leftist policies foster re-regulation in the communications domain, state protagonism, and market-alternative forms of media. These policies aim to rebalance the presence of the market, state, and civil society in the media landscape. They can be divided into the following categories: state media-creation policies, measures oriented toward private media-sector regulation, and community media-fostering policies. The ultimate goal of revitalizing market-alternative media logics is to democratize the public sphere.

All of the countries under discussion here have seen the creation of new state media or the revamping of existing ones. State television and radio stations have been launched in Venezuela, Ecuador, Brazil, and Argentina, while state ownership has also extended to print media in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Venezuela. Their public or governmental nature has been a matter of public debate almost everywhere. Oppositional voices have generally objected to state media expansion as outright propaganda politics. In the region, any such policy attempt is rapidly stigmatized as “Venezolanization.” However, aligned programming has also been defended outside Venezuela, where it is usually justified with claims regarding the illusory neutrality of oppositional private media.

Beyond these controversies, many of the new state media have become a stable presence that has opened up the public sphere to voices and points

of view that were previously excluded. At the same time, however, all of them show some difficulties disputing audience shares with the historically dominant private commercial media.

With respect to the re-regulation of private commercial media, various types of restrictions have been set up (or at least announced) at the constitutional, legislative, and administrative levels. The first kind of restriction concerns media ownership and market concentration. The second type of restriction concerns media content, such as national and regional production quotas, and multicultural programming. Such content quotas are inspired by protectionism, cultural nationalism, and worries about US cultural imperialism. In this sense, Lula or Chávez can be equally heard criticizing cheap imported products. In some cases, controversial content qualifications such as truthfulness-of-information clauses have been implemented. On this point, Argentina departs from the Andean countries by holding such content regulations at a distance. A third kind of regulations indirectly affects private media profits. These concern the establishment of mandatory media airtime or press space for public-interest or educational purposes, right-of-reply clauses, and the provision of access for market-weak voices (Koschützke and Gerber 2011; Waisbord 2011).

Regulatory policy agendas have, nevertheless, often remained rhetorical and have not always been consistently pursued. This gap between rhetoric and policy can be explained by factors such as institutional weakness (the lack of congressional majorities, for example), colonized bureaucracies, or – as is more relevant to the cases under discussion here – tactical settlements with powerful media actors.

The last significant media policy feature to be mentioned here affects the realm of community or grassroots media. The politics of giving civil society public standing as a legitimate actor and fostering community broadcasting beneath state- and market-driven media has been defended as access equalization, enfranchisement, voice pluralism, and leveling of the playing field. Public recognition of community media as legitimate actors, tripartite airwave reserves for public, private commercial, and private noncommercial operators, and other measures have been included in constitutions and legislation.

In most cases, new legislation picks up on reform proposals developed by civil-society groups engaged in media democratization. This has provided governments with some sectoral support. Nevertheless, these groups have not been unconditional allies. A frequent complaint on the part of community operators is that formal barriers (antenna power limits, confinement to rural areas, administrative costs) and informal thresholds (centralized administration inaccessible to remote groups) still persist, thereby favoring big

interests. Official alternative media policies also awaken fears of co-optation, instrumentalization, and loss of autonomy among community broadcasters.

## Explaining Variation

The three analytical dimensions discussed above generalize a sort of ideal-typical model of leftist governments' media activism against which empirical cases can be contrasted. The concrete governments under consideration perform differently for each dimension. What factors best account for the differences? Can these differences be explained by maintaining the existence of a common leftist core? Does Chile fall within the boundaries of leftist media activism?

The current polarization in regional political debates has made the politically laden claims regarding the existence of “two lefts” dominant.<sup>3</sup> This understanding has widely permeated the current debate in media politics as well. Differences have been reduced to dichotomies such as “populist” versus “nonpopulist,” “authoritarian” versus “democratic,” and “archaic” versus “modern” lefts. According to such depictions, media confrontation and media reform policies are a function of personalistic or autocratic impulses intended to reduce freedom of expression and suppress dissent. Leftism, according to this view, is merely an instrumental facade used to gain support; at best it is an expression of political immaturity and irresponsibility. In opposition to this “immature” left is the “mature” left, which has learned the lessons of history and accepts press freedom as part of democratic politics (Petkoff 2005; Castañeda 2006).

I argue that these binary distinctions obscure important commonalities and continuities. The nuanced differences may be more consistently explained, following Levitsky and Roberts (2011), by looking at the variable historical, structural, and institutional constraints that have shaped and conditioned the agendas pushed ahead by these various governments.

A focus on institutional stability, for example, may illuminate differences in the form of media activism. The governments in those countries that have experienced a party system collapse at some point and that have, therefore, emerged from new movements or as outsiders have been more radical in all media activism dimensions than those that stemmed from institutionalized politics.

It is precisely the context of institutional collapse that has led to the emergence of political outsiders who have evolved into personalist (or

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3 For an overview of these distinctions and critical discussions, see Ramírez Gallegos (2006) and Levitsky and Roberts (2011).

populist) leaders. The absence of preexisting organizational vehicles that are credible has made the use of direct public appeals through the media a key means of mobilizing support for Rafael Correa, for instance (Conaghan and De la Torre 2008). On the other hand, given the weakness of existing party organizations after such a collapse, oppositional voices also tend to converge in the media in their attempts to gain access to the public sphere (Ramírez Gallegos 2008). In sum, in contexts where party organizations have lost ground, the media become – in the eyes of all the political actors – the key arena for mobilizing public support.

These factors are important in explaining public communication practices, but they do not exhaustively account for the radical media policies of certain governments. The collapse of representative institutions went hand in hand with a popular backlash against neoliberals. This backlash, in turn, fueled radical projects that involved the transformation of a media landscape perceived as being a constitutive part of the old order. Weakly institutionalized oppositions, intense popular mobilization by governments, and windfall hydrocarbon rents, as seen in Venezuela, Bolivia, or Ecuador, encouraged ambitious transformative projects and new forms of popular sovereignty. These were in contrast to the more constrained ambitions of the leftist governments in Brazil, Uruguay, and Chile, with Argentina's ambitions lying somewhere in the middle. As for other policy areas, the real or perceived structural and institutional constraints determined how far leftist governments could go in their public confrontation with the media and in direct-communication practices as well as how radical their media reform policies could be.

The collapse of political institutions cannot usually be separated from a crisis in media and journalistic institutions. The discredited political parties and elites are usually intimately linked to the large media conglomerates. Not only do the two share a similar social background, and sometimes even close family ties, but their links also rest mostly on reciprocal arrangements that have secured their respective interests. In this way, the new political scenarios represent a break in traditional settlements and understandings between political and media elites. In such contexts, the already weak culture of newsroom autonomy in the region tends to disappear, given the owners' impulse to defend their endangered positions through their media. By displacing political elites, political newcomers also block big media interests from accessing key governmental levers they formerly controlled. This loss of control explains the latter's aggressive, and sometimes cartelized, responses (Botía 2007).

In Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia it is clearly evident that the crisis of the previous regimes' representative institutions was paralleled by a crisis in

media credibility. This explains why Chávez, Correa, and Morales have been able to successfully present the old political class and the media as agents of the powerful minorities they themselves oppose. In contrast, where media credibility is higher, as in Argentina, Brazil, or Uruguay, open confrontation may be a riskier move politically.

Correa's success in connecting media elites to the discredited banking institutions and political actors is a key example here. In Bolivia, the major media's collusion with the increasingly unpopular political elite, which governed until 2005, became evident during the mobilization process that drove Evo Morales to the presidency. In both these cases, the credibility crisis the big media went through occurred prior to the left turn and determined the perceptions and strategic stances of the nascent leadership. These crises not only shaped the new elites' views on the media, since they undermined the image of media institutions as a credible, representative, and fair mirror of society, but they also provided the new governments with political room to maneuver and encouraged them to push forward a radical media politics.

The same process occurred in Venezuela, although the episodes that brought about the media's credibility crisis occurred subsequent to governmental change. As Ellner (2008: 109) argues, the prevailing discussions, which focus on Chávez's populist style and personality, neglect the consistency and steady radicalization of his policies. Further radicalization has occurred each time the opposition has experienced a political setback. Its obsession with removing Chavez led the opposition to disdain political organization and to resort to putschist and anti-institutional strategies. These attempts failed and had the effect of further radicalizing the government's policy agendas. The evidence of this disdain for institutional politics was manifested in the media's cartelized oppositional behavior during the 2002/03 crises and the resulting collapse in media credibility (Botía 2007). Instead of the authoritarian personality ascribed to Chávez, it is actually Venezuela's institutional weakness that accounts more for the radicalization of Bolivarian communication politics. Radicalism in media activism is not caused by populism. Rather, both phenomena are possible under the same structural conditions. The views and ends that inform and shape media activism in the countries under consideration can be better understood by focusing on ideology.

Although Argentina suffered a partial collapse of its party system, its institutional crisis was not as extreme as those in the Andean countries. Despite their hegemony in the legislative arena, the Kirchners initially faced some constraints from civic and interest-based organizations, the media, and governors (Levitsky and Murillo 2008). These existing political and societal constraints notwithstanding, the Kirchners radicalized their confrontation

with the media. This radicalization took place after a long agrarian strike that was backed by some of the big news media. As a result, the Kirchners' popularity levels fell spectacularly by 2008, and they lost the midterm elections. Nevertheless, the radicalized media activism they pursued after 2008 seems to have significantly affected the credibility of the media they confronted: the government exposed the dominance of extra-journalistic values in news coverage with some success. All the constraints referred to above impose limits upon governmental action. But the perception of those limits varies according to the prior experiences and contingent prudential judgments of governmental actors. Governments do not always act in a coherent fashion across different sectors of government and across time. In terms of the attitude towards the media and public communications, different views generally coexist inside government entourages and broader governing coalitions, as the Brazilian case shows. Inside the *petista* government, ideological hardliners compete with advisors more inclined to compromise in the face of media interests or journalistic demands. As insider narratives reveal, Lula, who is himself divided between historical convictions and pragmatism, picks up one or the other's agenda depending on the circumstances (Kotscho 2006). The moderation of media policy results from the political need to achieve compromises with the parliamentary opposition and established power agents, whose interests are intertwined with those of the media elites. In Brazil, the dashing of grassroots groups' media policy expectations and the accommodation of political and market interests have been linked to the political realignments the Lula government has experienced.

In contrast to Brazil and Uruguay, the governing Socialist Party elites in Chile do not appear to be torn between their views and what is politically feasible when in government. Their public (and private) conformity with the status quo in the media sphere makes it legitimate to ask whether Chile is still a case of leftist media activism. This paper's focus on constraints allows us to include it here, at least analytically. As Roberts (1995) shows from a historical perspective, after Allende's fall the once radical socialists underwent a process of self-reflection that led to their moderation; due to the strategic logic and institutional confines of the democratic transition, they later became the hegemonic party of the Chilean left. Aware of the limited political room left by the new institutional scenario, this already ideologically changed left, entered into redemocratization seeking moderation – that is, looking for allies in the center of the electoral arena, not risking grassroots mobilization, remaining cautiously pragmatic, and relying on elite-level bargaining with the rightist opposition and business. Leftist media critics remained circumscribed to the so-called “extra-parliamentary left”; they remained outside of government.

In sum, then, what is the significance of this governmental leftist media activism for the region? Seen in historical perspective, the media in Latin America developed into more autonomous political institutions over the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This new political role made the media a potential topic of political debate, while their elitist bias made them a theme for democratization agendas.

How did the various leftist governments respond politically to the demands of media democratization? Two paths seem recognizable here: the populist outsider and the partisan left, following Levitzky and Roberts (2011). In the *populist outsider* path, the absence of a credible politico-electoral alternative placed the media at the forefront of opposition. Oppositional voices and impulses in society tended to gravitate toward the media. Parts of the oppositional political forces tend to be highly dependent on the media for their electoral performance. The populist outsiders have no background of critical leftist views of the media, but their confrontation with (some of) the big media made the option of making political moves toward the post-neoliberal media democratization agendas in civil society tempting. As for the *partisan leftists*, they underwent processes of moderation and accommodation on their paths to power, which mostly derived from their decision not to openly confront the big media. Nevertheless, their genetic memory and relevant parts of their constituency and cadres historically upheld demands of media democratization and regulation.

The political elite change, i.e., the rise to government of populist-outsider or partisan lefts, disrupted the previous *modus vivendi* between political and media elites in the context of wider technological and institutional transformations in global media landscapes. The politization of media and communication realities in the midst of these transitions will deeply affect the future shape and role of the media in Latin American democratic politics in unpredictable ways.

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## **La política de medios de los gobiernos de izquierda en América Latina**

**Resumen:** ¿Ha sido relevante el giro a la izquierda en América Latina para la política de medios? ¿Tuvo impacto la ideología en las prácticas y políticas gubernamentales relativas a los medios y las instituciones políticas? Por medio de una evaluación de los discursos sobre los medios, de las prácticas de comunicación directa y de las políticas de regulación del sector mediático por parte de los recientes gobiernos de izquierda en América Latina, el presente ensayo focaliza en la existencia de un activismo mediático de los gobiernos de izquierda en la región. En tanto muestra cómo las distinciones binarias corrientes que afirman la existencia de dos izquierdas – populista y no-populista – oscurece importantes rasgos comunes y continuidades, el autor plantea que las restricciones institucionales y estructurales dan cuenta de las diferencias entre los varios gobiernos de izquierda en América Latina. En suma, el artículo desafía la prevaleciente subestimación del factor ideológico en las explicaciones de las relaciones entre medios y gobiernos en la región.

**Palabras clave:** América Latina, medios, periodismo, gobierno, ideología, izquierda